Pasmanda Muslims Need Justice, Not Just Lip Service

PM Modi has taken up the cause of 'Pasmanda' Muslims in order to woo them to the BJP fold in the run-up to the 2024 elections. But it was his government that said Islam and Christianity were egalitarian religions, did not have untouchability, hence no need to accord SC status to 'Dalit Muslims'

Pasmanda Muslims

Abhay Kumar

Ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to reach out to Pasmanda Muslims.

Perhaps for the first time, he has publicly spoken about their issues. Speaking at the booth-level workers' meet in Bhopal on June 27, Modi rightly said that Pasmanda Muslims were educationally backward and their miserable life was the result of their exclusion from the formal sectors of employment.

He went on to say that they did not receive benefits from the previous regimes, nor had their voices been heard.

He was correct to say they were denied equality and were exploited. However, his reference to Pasmanda Muslims, who are treated as "untouchables", is the most significant part of his speech.

Pasmanda, a Persian term, refers to those who have "fallen behind". Simply put, Pasmanda Muslims are Backwards (Shudra) and Dalits (Ati-shudra), who embraced Islam centuries ago to free themselves from caste oppression.

But the change of religion did not liberate them. Till today, they continue to suffer from caste discrimination and material deprivation.

They are even victims of segregation and untouchability. It is ironic that Islam, as a textual religion, underscores equality and brotherhood, but the social structure of the Muslim community is far from being egalitarian.

In his speech, Modi unambiguously accepted that Pasmanda Muslims were victims of untouchability. As he put it, "Those who are Pasmanda Muslims have not been given equality so far; they are treated as inferior (neecha) and considered untouchable (achhut)".

Note that Modi's acceptance of untouchability has contradicted the denial mode of the Hindu Right as well as his own Government's position in the Supreme Court that Islam and Christianity do not have oppressive systems of caste and untouchability.

For example, the Modi Government submitted an affidavit to the Supreme Court in November 2022 and denied the existence of untouchability in Islam and Christianity.

The affidavit was filed in response to a petition in the Supreme Court that demanded Scheduled Castes (SC) status for Dalits who had converted to Islam and Christianity.

The petitioners argued that the exclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians from the SC category was discriminatory and it violated Fundamental Rights.

However, the Modi Government told the Supreme Court that SC status for Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians could not be accepted on the ground that "religions like Islam and Christianity did not have "the oppressive system of untouchability".

By accepting the ground reality that Pasmanda Muslims face untouchability, Prime Minister Modi has now supported the argument in favour of the extension of the SC status to them.

According to the existing rules, SC reservations are extended to followers of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

The Dalits, who have embraced Islam and Christianity, have been so far kept out of the SC list, even though there has been a strong movement for their inclusion. Through a Presidential Order of 1950, Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians have been denied SC status with the argument that Islam and Christianity are egalitarian religions and there is no existence of caste and untouchability.

Remember that the SC reservations are given to those communities which show "extreme social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability".

However, a large corpus of empirical evidence and field works are available to show the existence of caste and untouchability in Islam and Christianity. Even the social, educational, and economic conditions of the Hindu Dalits, who are on the SC list and Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, who are kept out of the SC list, largely converge.

In 2008, Professor Satish Deshpande and Geetika Bapna prepared a status report titled "Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities" for the National Commission for Minorities, Government of India and made "a strong case for according to Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Muslims and Christians".

While giving authentic data on the social, educational and economic backwardness of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, they wrote that "untouchability" proper is sometimes practised" against Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians.

Similarly, Justice Ranganath Misra Commission, which submitted its report to the Government of India, in 2007, recommended SC status to Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians.

However, the Modi Government did not accept it and went on to tell the Supreme Court that the Misra could not be relied upon as it lacked empirical data.

Instead, the Modi Government constituted a new commission in 2022 to examine if Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians could be included in the SC list.

Three member commission is headed by former Chief Justice of India K. G. Balakrishnan.

Appearing before the Supreme Court, the Modi Government cited the newly formed commission and requested the Supreme Court to wait till the new commission submits its report.

However, the critics argue that the rejection of the Misra Commission report and setting up a new commission is politically motivated.

It is high time Modi accepted the bigger truth. Who would deny that Pasmanda Muslims have been the worst victims of systemic discrimination at the hands of the majoritarian state? During the communal riots, they have been the most vulnerable sections. Even those Pasmanda Muslims, who have been BJP workers, have not been spared during the communal mobilization as seen recently in Uttarakhand.

Should Modi not ensure security for them? Even Modi's nine-year rule has failed to give relief to Pasmanda Muslims.

The rolling back of social welfare schemes, including the Maulana Azad scholarship for minorities and massive privatization, have negatively affected Pasmanda Muslims. It is high time PM Modi ensured social justice, going beyond paying lip service.

(Author is a Delhi based journalist. He has taught political science at the Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board of Delhi University)